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THE RELIGIOUS VALUE OF SOCIAL WORK

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ABSTRACT

Is there a connection between social work and religion? This is denied by the pietistic mind that fails to see the natural basis of the supernatural world and the materialistic mind that sees in religion only a philosophy, not a living of life. The truth holds the middle place since religion is basically the observance of the law of God in the orderly use of all material and spiritual powers. This is synonymous with social welfare. Social works benefits the individual through the group by scientific thought and action. This does not impair religious values but multiplies them. Theoretically the motive of religion and the method of social work sublimates and reinforces each other and practically this has been so in the church since the beginning. This is verified by the early communism of the church, the foundations of monasteries, the organization of parishes and guilds, and most of all by the age-long experience of the universal church, which through its hierarchy places the advantages of its organization at the disposal of every adherent. Religion exalts the organization of social work when it gives it a supernatural motive, and social work augments the practice of religion when social work properly fulfills its functions. Social work and religion alike tend to a normal life in a normal world, to the physical, mental, and moral development of man. Social work aims in particular that man have life; religion that he have it abundantly.

The miracle of the loaves and fishes well symbolizes the doctrine of religion and the practice of social work. The multitude followed the Divine Master, allured by his gospel and he, seeing their need, wrought a miracle. He had compassion on the multitude to whom he broke the bread of life—here was the doctrine of religion; he satisfied their temporal needs by well-ordered charity, for they were divided into companies of fifty and the fragments left over were conserved—here was the practice of social work. Did religion and social work meet in the desert of Judea and have they since that time traveled the Christian centuries together?

Has social work, that is, organized effort for the welfare of the masses, a religious value? There are two classes of people who say that it has not; there are two types of mind that deny it. One type is the religious mind that fails to see religion in social work because there is not always the direct contact of him who gives and him who receives, and because of the frequent absence of a directly spiritual end. They see religion in the priestly missionary

who carries the gospel and civilization to the South Sea Islanders, but they fail to see religion in the social worker who brings sunshine into the hovels of the slums and hope into the hearts of its outcasts. To them, poverty and a host of other social maladjustments are inevitable, like a flood or the measles, and whoever would eliminate them is flying in the face of immutable natural laws or divine truths. They continually call to mind the frailty of man and the vanity of his works and with folded hands assure us with resignation that here in this vale of tears there is no abiding place and the poor we shall have always with us. They do not realize the great fact that God is the author of the natural as well as the supernatural order, and that the supernatural is always built upon the natural. To them, cloistered charity and the giving of alms is religion but social work along political and economic lines is at best humanitarian.

The second type of mind, the materialistic, sees in social work the *summum bonum* of all living and the apex of all civilization. At times, it even sees in Christ, not of course the Savior of the world and the Son of the living God, but a social reformer, who by his supreme thought and life gives inspiration to the ages for the uplift of humanity. But as for religion, it is poles apart from social work, for to the materialistic mind, religion means merely an adhesion to wornout creeds, now and then embellished by gorgeous ritual or enunciated with lugubrious solemnity. It is true, they will say, that the votaries of religion have done and are doing some social work but that is apart from their religion and, in fact, in spite of it. The very charities of the church to their way of thinking have been disastrous to rich and poor alike. The rich they have made proud, and the poor they have made paupers. One writer tells us that "for eighteen centuries the charitable and legislative efforts of society have been pauperizing instead of elevating men."¹ Lecky in his *History of European Morals* gravely assures us that "in the sphere of simple poverty, it can hardly be doubted that the Catholic church has created more misery than it has cured" (II. 95). A more recent writer, the dean of sociology

¹ Adams, John Hopkins Hist. Stud.

in the University of Missouri, says that "the charity of the church was wholly indiscriminating and therefore evil in its consequences."

This is not the place to answer these charges, which for the most part are founded on a false generalization from isolated facts and a want of distinction between motive and accomplishment—a twentieth-century standard is expected and demanded of the tenth. To such writers, religion is a thing remote and has no comfort for the present life; it only teaches patient endurance for the ills of time, promising in their stead the glories of eternity; to them religion is the Great Deluder, having ever upon her lying lips the assurance that in heaven the poor will be rich, the sick will be healed and the sorrowing will be filled with joy.

It would seem that the truth, like virtue, holds a middle place between these extremes; that social work is not necessarily religious nor necessarily mundane; that it may have a religious value and that it has such precisely in as far as it is inspired by religious motives and helps to fulfil the designs of God by bringing normal living into the lives of mortal men.

What then is the connection between religion and social work? Religion is the expression of the relations between God and man, and social work, which is organized effort, for the benefit of society, may be and often is, the concrete expression of religion in a large and constructive way. By religion we mean the recognition of the dependence of the creature on the Creator and the working out of the divine economy in ourselves and in others. Religion means simultaneously the happiness of man and the glory of God; it means that through the proper use of creatures, man comes to the Creator; this means that the earth and its fulness is for man, that singly and collectively, he may rise to the full stature of humanity in body, mind, and spirit; religion means that the wealth of the world should be so distributed by secondary causes that every child of Adam should enjoy an equality of opportunity, so as to guarantee as Leo XIII said, "a human minimum of frugal comfort."

This guaranty depends on many factors; on human personalities and equations, on the liberality or parsimony of nature, and more particularly, on the free will of other men—hence the inequali-

ties among men and the vicissitudes of their fortunes. Whenever the stern laws of justice and the fixed forces of nature fail to give this minimum of human happiness, then the precepts of charity and the fruits of science should supplement in the name of human brotherhood that which is wanting. This it does by relief, by rehabilitation, and best of all by preventive measures. Here is the sphere of social work; here it aims at the normal life and here is its union with religion.

History, alas! shows that all too frequently the masses of mankind have been denied a minimum of human happiness; the wisdom of economic laws and political control have been insufficient and it has always remained for the hand and heart of charity to relieve distress and sorrow. When this relief was administered to large groups with plan and method and with vision for the future it was social work, social work nourished with the milk of human kindness. If the motive was God, it was charity; if the motive was man, it was philanthropy, leading to the vestibule of religion.

Religion is primarily concerned with the kingdom within us, with our intentions and motives, and thus touches even our indifferent acts. No less a teacher than the Great Apostle tells us that "whether you eat, or drink, or whatsoever else you do, do all to the glory of God." If these acts can be made meritorious surely acts done for our neighbor, done efficiently, with knowledge of causes and effects, and bringing benedictions to multitudes can be meritorious. Surely, social work may have a religious value. Moreover, it would seem that such acts would be capable of a value multiplied as many times as the number of persons they touch and the benefits they confer. Their intelligence and efficiency should not militate against their religious value, on the contrary this value is vastly increased by these very methods.

Systematic social work, unlike personal charity, reaches out to unnumbered thousands, is imitated and repeated in many lands, continued and enlarged during many years, and thus brings blessings to thousands yet unborn. We need but recall the superlative blessings that have come in critical hours and without condescension to needy families, through such socialized legislation as mothers' pension funds, workingmen's compensation acts, and child labor

laws, to realize their contributions to the fundamentals of religion. With Christian zeal we may well envy the men and women who are responsible for putting these rehabilitating and preventive laws upon our statute books.

If social work is narrowly conceived as merely cold-blooded technique applied to human problems, it is a misnomer. Such work will but scratch the surface and defer the solution of problems to another day. Back of it must be charity for man, rooted in the love of God, the bond that makes all mankind kin, for all of us may at some time or another be in need of charity as well as dispensers of it. Even the strongest among us is dependent on the civilization of the past and the social organization of the present, for against the primal forces of nature and adverse circumstances, we are powerless. After all has been said, our whole civilization is the heritage of the ages, for we live not only by the accumulated knowledge and experience of the past but by its sympathy and love as well. Man by nature is a social being and it is not surprising that the first command of the Old Law was a social one, "increase and multiply" and that the last aspiration of the New Law was likewise a social one, "I wish—to be anathema—for my brother." Singly, we are barbarian, collectively we are civilized!

The charity of religion as well as the needs of nature makes us all neighbors in a mighty universe of God. It is an elemental fact that social work devoid of religious influences is greatly hampered and prone to failure. Such an eminent authority as Edward T. Devine tells us that the only solution of the poverty problem is the religious one and continuing he says

that we may have religious treatment of poverty, the first essential of all is that we shall have a religion—a militant, aggressive religious faith, with its deacons and prophets, with its sacraments and sanctions, with its hopes and promises, aye, with its commandments and terrors; a historical religion with its festivals and fast days, its holidays and holy days, a religion which makes appeal to reason and to tradition, which commands our loyalty and sanctifies our fellowship; such a religion as Christianity, purified of superstition and enriched by science, along among the historic faiths, offers to our American people.¹

¹ *The Spirit of Social Work*, p. 173.

This is true because the essence of religion in practice means the forgetting of self in the interest of our fellow-men. Christ equalized the love of neighbor with the love of God for his second commandment was like unto the first, and he elevated every deed done to the least of his brethren as a deed done unto himself. Sympathy and liberality among the Gentiles and Jews of antiquity were always in honor, but it remained for Christ to link in one common law, charity to man and worship to God. Christ would have us even forget himself in the interest of our brother, telling us to leave our offering at the altar to reconcile first our brother whom we have offended. In a word, the ideal of religion is charity to our brother and the ideal of social work is this same charity made efficient by study and method and applied to many brethren. Hence religion as found in the Christian church has always included social work, being the outgrowth of its doctrines and traditions, so that it may be said without exaggeration that the history of the church is coincident with the history of social service.

Hardly had the church been established when its tenets of brotherhood led to a communistic life wherein all shared alike the goods of this world. This naturally led to systematized charity work in which the deacons and deaconesses besides assisting at the divine services, visited and aided the poor, the sick, the widowed, and the prisoner. Emerging from the catacombs, the church marched through northern Europe with her newly founded religious orders, and established centers of religion which became centers of civilization because she imitated her Founder, who cared for the body to make it worthy of the soul. The religious orders taught the gospel of work as well as the value of prayer and turned the wildernesses of the northern hordes into gardens of civilization. Truly has a recent writer said: "The monasteries and cathedrals were vast because of the enormous part they played in common life and the incredible throngs that came to them for worship and to claim their ministrations."¹

With the organization of parishes, social work was always the handmaid of religion since visits to the poor and the sick were associated with the Eucharist and Extreme Unction. Bishops were

¹ Ralph Adams Cram, *The Substance of Gothic*, p. 105.

careful that alms were not given without an examination of details and the abuse of charity was prevented by obliging strangers to present letters of recommendation and show their good faith by a willingness to work. Orphans and foundlings were adopted into Christian families and poor boys intrusted to reliable masters for vocational education. With St. James religion meant "to visit the fatherless and widows in their tribulation and to keep one's self unspotted from this world."

During the Middle Ages new social problems were met by new methods in the organizations of guilds which were partly religious and partly social. These developed provisions for every form of human misery and suffering along preventive lines, hardly appreciated in our day. Even Virchow reluctantly admitted "that it was reserved for the Catholic church and above all for Innocent III not only to open the bourse of Christian charity and mercy in all its fulness, but also to guide the life-giving stream into every branch of human life in an ordered manner."¹ The guilds established loan banks, legal bureaus, day nurseries, homes for the aged, and when later on these agencies relaxed their zeal or depreciated in their methods, the Council of Trent renewed the ancient precepts of the church by reminding all bishops to support in true Christian spirit social work in all its phases. When problems of human distress in crowded cities and towns became more massive and complex and demanded new methods and institutions, it was the church who organized the hospital and the asylum, expressing in socialized activity the spirit of religion. Ralph Adams Cram commenting on this period says, "education, mercy, medical science, charity, hospitality, and all the arts were centered in religious houses which also acted as guardians for orphans and minors."²

Since the eighteenth century, the state has supplanted the church in many fields of social endeavor, not because the church was indifferent or had renounced her holy heritage, but because most of the poverty and distress arising from the industrial revolution were the outcome of political and economic conditions over which the church had no control. This situation still obtains and

¹ Walsh, *Popes and Science*, p. 256.

² Cram, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

yet today, as in the past, every forward movement for the weaker members of society is inaugurated by the church or private initiative because the unwieldy and impersonal state is content to follow where they lead. Even when social work is completely secularized, it is not wholly divorced from religion because its inspiration, its growth, and its glory have been religious. Practical reasons induce the state to distribute the fruit whose seed was planted and whose flower blossomed in the church. Often, too, through individual interest the spirit of religion is found in the charities of the state and then it adds to its efficiency a tender touch that neither salary nor science can supply. The fact to be noted is that the rapid growth of the church among the nations was due in a great measure to the group thinking and group acting of her leaders, which brought to the faithful spiritual and temporal blessings alike. Thus does the church bring to the least of her children the service of the mammoth machinery of her whole organization. From pope to parish priest with precept and counsel, with dogma and ritual, with hospital and hospice, she enriches the life of every Christian, bringing into that life the highest thought and the widest experience of well-nigh two thousand years. Religion exalts organization and organization augments religion.

Deeds speak more eloquently than words and the church, which preached with St. James that "faith without works is dead" naturally expressed herself in works of social extent. Eminently has she done so since her foundation and with the flame of the spirit has she sanctified her deeds for so was she taught by her Founder, who through the healing of the body cured the sores of the soul. But healings like miracles are rare exceptions. The message and mission of Christ, in addition to their sublime supernatural aims, made likewise for the establishment of a better natural world in which by means of commandment and counsel the evils of the body and of soul should be so prevented that all the children of Adam might enjoy length of days and normal life. This, therefore, is a legitimate part of religion's purpose—that man may have life and have it abundantly.

To attain this abundant life, man must possess his rights and fulfil his duties and here too religion is the champion of the one as

well as of the other. No one arranges for his own coming into the world; he is brought in by nature's own process. Therefore nature owes him a proper human living, leading to life's proper end. Religion must be concerned that every human being shall have a normal measure of health, education, recreation, and even of work, for without these natural foundations it is impossible rightly to rear the supernatural edifice of the spirit. The church has at all times been solicitous about these natural foundations, voicing her concern in dogmas and the declarations of ecumenical councils, in the encyclicals of popes and the pastorals of bishops, but most of all in the consecration of the lives of multitudes of her men and women, who by national and even international organizations, have given a service to mankind that has been the admiration of the world.

We are all our brother's keeper and although modern conditions may have segregated rich and poor, we still have the obligation to succor our less fortunate brother. Today, his number is legion and we can for the most part single him out only through social work; only collectively and vicariously can we pay our debt of Christian charity. Religion sees in the poor and the wayward, in the sick and the alien, not merely creatures of our common mortality but children of our heavenly Father, children in whom is the image of God; and social science offers to religion, methods, the best that men have devised and tested.

We belong to a brotherhood, whose eldest brother is Christ; we preach his service and sacrifice, which means that when our brother asks help, there is no service of heart or mind too slight, no sacrifice of purse or person too great. Our Savior has set the goal, "Greater love than this no man hath, that a man lay down his life for his friend." This is the zenith of religion and this is the spirit that gives social work, besides its innate worth, a value almost without measure.